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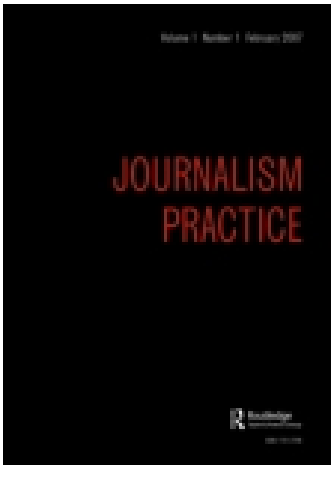

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Social Media References in Newspapers

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SOCIAL MEDIA REFERENCES IN NEWSPAPERS
Facebook, Twitter and YouTube as sources in newspaper journalism

Steve Paulussen and **Raymond A. Harder**

Social media are increasingly being used as sources in mainstream news coverage. Yet, while the research so far has focused mainly on the use of social media in particular situations, such as breaking news coverage, during crisis news events or in times of elections, little attention is paid to journalists' routine, day-to-day monitoring of social media platforms. The aim of this study is to examine the use and selection of social media as sources in routine newspaper coverage. First, it presents a quantitative overview of all the articles published between January 2006 and December 2013 in the print editions of two Flemish (north Belgian) quality newspapers, De Standaard *and* De Morgen*, that explicitly refer to* Facebook*,* Twitter *or* YouTube*. Next, a content analysis is conducted of a sample of newspaper articles published in 2013 that explicitly mention* Facebook*,* Twitter *or* YouTube *as sources of information. The goal of this content analysis is to examine the different appearances and functions of social media references in the news. The study thus provides a first insight into Belgian newspaper journalists' regular sourcing routines in relation to social media.*

KEYWORDS *Facebook*; newspaper journalism; social media; sourcing; *Twitter*; *YouTube*

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Introduction

Scientific data on the number of journalists using social media are hard to find, but it is safe to say that the majority of contemporary journalists use Twitter and Facebook for professional purposes (Oriella PR Network 2013; Hermida 2013). Studies also suggest that social media has become a popular, if not indispensable, tool for newsgathering in various domains, ranging from politics and foreign news to sports and celebrity news (Ahmad 2010; Cozma and Chen 2013; Sheffer and Schultz 2010; Marwick and boyd 2011). However, while the research on the use of social media in journalism has mainly focused on the role of Twitter for breaking news coverage (e.g. Allan 2012), during crises and conflicts (e.g. Hermida, Lewis, and Zamith 2014) or in times of elections (e.g. Burgess and Bruns 2012; Broersma and Graham 2012), less attention has been paid so far to journalists' routine, day-to-day monitoring of social media platforms.

For journalists, social media can fulfil different functions at the same time. Canter (2013) found that, whereas news organisations are particularly interested in social media as a platform to market their news content, increase traffic to their websites and strengthen customer relationships, individual journalists take a more informal and personal approach: rather than promoting links to their published articles, they primarily use social media to talk about what they are working on, share opinions and ideas or for live-blogging. Broersma and Graham (2012) suggest that Twitter functions as a social

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space where journalists keep in touch with their peers and professional network, find new contacts, and discuss news and issues in a similar way to how they (used to) do it in the pub or canteen. In a similar vein, Hermida (2010) speaks of social media as an ambient environment where journalists can monitor the constant stream of news and information and detect "trends and issues hovering under the news radar" (302). As such, Twitter is increasingly used by journalists as a personal news wire (Heinrich 2012). Yet little is still known about how media professionals' engagement with social media affects the daily news we receive from them. Do social media have the potential to alter professional newsgathering and sourcing routines in journalism? And if so, to what extent and how will these changing practices be observable in the mainstream news output?

Gatekeeping in a Networked Public Sphere

The internet, and particularly social media, enables citizens, civil society, and political and business elites to bypass traditional mass media and directly communicate with each other. Several media scholars have pointed at the emergence of a "networked public sphere" where all users can participate equally in the creation, mixing and sharing of (visual) information and opinions (Benkler 2006). In this open, interactive sphere, formerly distinct roles between sources, producers, and consumers of news and information are eroding, and the continuous streams of content can no longer be owned or controlled (Heinrich 2012; Hermida 2013). Since the rise of the internet, online journalism scholars have been preoccupied with the question of how journalists' traditional gatekeeping role is changing in the context of interactivity and user participation in the news process. The overall conclusion of these studies is that even though professional journalists have lost some of their grip on the flow of news in society and have come to see their users as "active recipients" rather than passive consumers (Hermida et al. 2011), news professionals keep playing a pivotal role in the news production process and its different stages of information gathering, selection, verification, presentation and dissemination of the news (Singer et al. 2011).

The process of news selection and journalistic sourcing is shaped by long-established and quite stable professional standards and routines (Reich 2009). Media sociologists like Gans (1979) described in the 1970s how the news selection processes in print and TV newsrooms are determined by a combination of efficiency and power considerations. Journalistic efficiency is obtained through the optimal allocation of scarce resources in terms of space and time, whereas power considerations have to do with the perceived authority that journalists attribute to their sources. In some recent publications, online journalism scholars like Reich (2011) and Hermida, Lewis, and Zamith (2014) refer to the "hierarchy of credibility", a concept derived from sociologist Howard Becker (1967), who states that in any social system people with higher rank and status are deemed more credible than people with lower rank and status. Applied to journalism, this means that journalists are inclined to respect a certain source hierarchy in which they ascribe more credibility to official elite sources, such as known experts and representatives of political and business institutions, than to unofficial sources, such as ordinary citizens (see also Sigal 1973). There is a good deal of evidence, moreover, that shows that in the age of the internet, professional journalists rely heavily on institutional sources of information whereas less credible sources, such as ordinary citizens, receive news space only in the second instance, when official sources are not available (Thurman 2008; Reich 2011; De

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Keyser and Raeymaeckers 2012). One may wonder whether social media is capable of breaking these sourcing patterns in journalism.

Some scholars suggest that the economic circumstances in which contemporary journalists have to work even impede change and innovation in journalism practices (see Paulussen 2012). Boczkowski (2010) argues that journalists' newsgathering and monitoring of information, which increasingly take place behind computer screens, in combination with their imitation behaviour, are ultimately leading to less diversity in journalists' sourcing practices. Following Boczkowski (2010), one can argue that social media platforms such as Twitter have become part of the journalists' "technological infrastructure" through which they monitor (and imitate) both each other and each other's sources. As the same sources are being recycled over and over again through different media channels, they replicate and reinforce themselves, as was also observed by Messner and DiStaso (2008) in their study on the use of blogs as sources in traditional media. Even though imitation has always been a characteristic of news production—the term "pack journalism" goes back to the 1970s (Crouse 2012)—the "source cycle" now seems to expand beyond the newsroom to the entire networked news ecology.

In this respect, there is little reason to assume that the use of social media as a journalistic source will lead to an increased diversity of voices in the news, since new voices may still find it difficult to break into the journalists' professional network or "source cycle". Moreover, the flow of information has tremendously accelerated due to the immediate nature of today's networked communication. Drawing on Boczkowski (2010), we assume that the increasing workload and time pressure in combination with information abundance may require journalists to fall back on old (and safe) routines of news production rather than exploring new practices of newsgathering and reporting. Hence, we assume that the use of social media as a news source in newspapers will be subject to established professional standards and routines of news selection. We also expect that the "hierarchy of credibility" of the available sources will also be respected in relation to social media, which means that social media content cited in newspapers will more likely come from well-known or newsworthy people than from unknown ordinary citizens.

Research Goals and Methodology

As Broersma and Graham (2013, 448) indicate, much of the journalism research about social media is based "on either interviews with journalists or an analysis of their tweets", while little is still known about "the interplay between social media and newspaper reporting". The study by Broersma and Graham (2013) is the first that provides a quantitative analysis of the use of Twitter as a news source in newspaper content. They analysed all news stories published in four British and four Dutch daily newspapers during 2007–2011 in which tweets are mentioned. Despite some clear differences between the UK and Dutch newspapers, they found that in past years Twitter has become a regularly used source for newspaper journalists in both countries, especially to "tap into the private sphere of well-known or newsworthy people, ranging from celebrities to politicians", but also to "flavour news stories with quotes that express the opinions or experiences of a range of sources" (460). Whereas these authors only focused on Twitter as a news source, the current study also takes into account Facebook and YouTube.

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The aim of this study is to examine the use and selection of social media as a news source in routine newspaper coverage. First, a quantitative overview is presented of all articles published from January 2006 to December 2013 in the print editions of two Flemish (north Belgian) quality newspapers, *De Standaard* and *De Morgen*, that explicitly refer to the terms "Facebook", "Twitter" and/or "YouTube". In the collected data, these three social media platforms occur as either (a part of) the topic of the story or as a source of information. The data were collected using the Flemish electronic press database Mediargus. In total, we found 6868 news articles in *De Morgen* and 7111 news articles in *De Standaard* referring to at least one of the three social media platforms.

In a next step, a content analysis was conducted using a sample of 591 newspaper articles published in 2013. The goal of this analysis was to examine the use and functions of social media as sources in these news stories. We analysed 20 per cent of the 2954 news items published between 1 January and 31 December 2013 in *De Morgen* and *De Standaard* that included a reference to at least one of the three social media sites. The sampling was achieved by selecting every fifth article in the chronologically ordered search list of the press database Mediargus. This resulted in a dataset of 285 news items from *De Morgen* and 306 news items from *De Standaard*. The sample is sufficient to provide a valid insight into how journalists from these two newspapers integrate social media content in their news stories.

The content analysis looked at the following variables:

1. The function of the social media sites in the article: are they part of the subject of the story or do they function as (only, primary or non-primary) news source?
2. The topic of the news article, for which we used the following categories: politics, economy, sports, human interest, media, culture/arts, crime/justice, technology, science/education, war/conflict, and other.
3. The geographic focus of the news item: regional, national or international.
4. The social media actors mentioned in the article: politicians, government authorities, business representatives, civil society actors, experts, celebrities, athletes, ordinary citizens, and other.

The initial coding was undertaken by the two authors, who each analysed approximately half of the articles. A subsample of 100 randomly selected articles was coded by both researchers to assess intercoder reliability for each variable. Cohen's kappa scores were between 0.80 (for the variable "type of source") and 0.98 (for variables "reference to Facebook" and "reference to Twitter").

Results

In this section, we present the results on the use of social media in newspaper articles of the two Flemish quality newspapers *De Morgen* and *De Standaard*. First, we provide an overall picture of the number of articles that include explicit references to the social media platforms YouTube, Facebook and Twitter during 2006–2013. In total, 13,979 newspaper articles contained at least one reference to one of these three social media sites. In 2013, *De Morgen* published 1434 news stories mentioning YouTube, Facebook or Twitter, while *De Standaard* had 1520 of such articles. This means that every day, on average, about five articles in each of both newspapers refer to at least one of the three platforms (4.7 for *De Morgen* and 5.0 for *De Standaard*).

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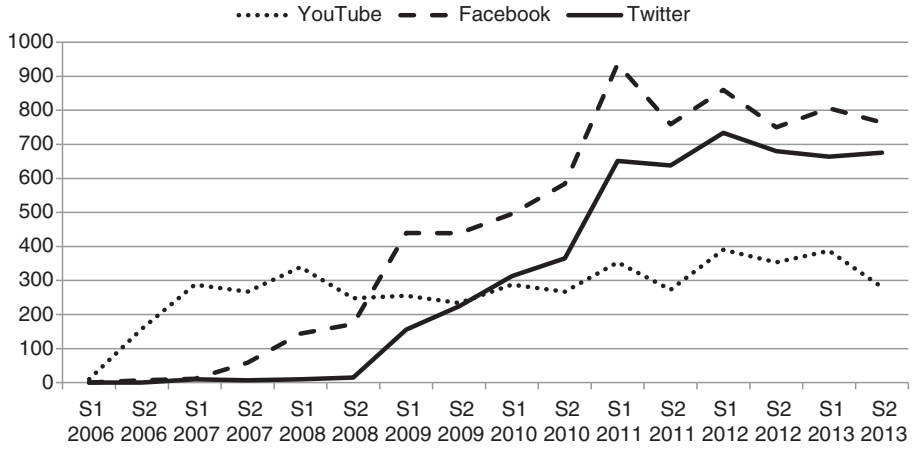

FIGURE 1
Evolution of the number of newspaper articles referring to YouTube, Facebook and Twitter in *De Morgen* and *De Standaard*, January 2006 to December 2013 (N = 13,979)

As shown in Figure 1, references to each of these three social media sites have become common in daily newspaper reporting. The video-sharing site YouTube broke through in the Flemish newspapers at the beginning of 2007 and can now (in 2013) reckon on an average 1.1 references per day in each newspaper. Since 2007, Facebook has also grown to become a regularly used reference—both as a topic and as a source (see later)—in the Flemish newspapers; in 2013 Facebook received, on average, 2.4 explicit mentions per day in *De Morgen* and 2.7 in *De Standaard*. The first mentions of the Twitter platform in the Flemish press appeared in the second half of 2008; five years later, *De Morgen* and *De Standaard* explicitly refer to the microblogging site in, respectively, 2.1 and 2.2 of their daily newspaper articles. While Table 1 shows that social media has become part of the daily newspaper reporting, the figures also suggest that YouTube, Facebook and Twitter still play a limited and subordinate role as a news source.

Further analysis confirms that social media has not yet become a major primary news source for Flemish newspaper journalists. This is illustrated by Table 1, which presents the findings of the content analysis of 591 news items referring to social media of *De Morgen* and *De Standaard* from January to December 2013. The articles were coded for whether the social media sites were mentioned as the only source, as one amongst different sources, or only as (a part of) the subject of the story.

The results show that in 35 percent of the articles referring to Facebook, Twitter or YouTube, these social media platforms are either the subject of the story themselves or related to the story's subject. These articles mostly appear on the economy and technology news pages of the newspapers. In 416 of the coded articles, or 70 per cent of the total sample, social media are used as a news source. For the remainder of this study, the 175 news items referring to social media *only* in relation to the story's subject are excluded from the analysis.

If social media are used by newspaper journalists as a source, the stories mostly include references to other sources as well. As shown in Table 2, 13.5 per cent of the articles are based on social media content only, 45 per cent mention social media as a primary but not the only source, and 41 per cent refer to Facebook, Twitter or YouTube as

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TABLE 1
Number of articles referring to social media as (part of) subject and/or as source

	Social media mentioned as (part of) subject	Social media mentioned only as (part of) subject	Social media mentioned as source
De Morgen (*N* = 285)			
Number of items	95	82	203
%	33.3	28.8	71.2
De Standaard (*N* = 306)			
Number of items	112	93	213
%	36.6	30.4	69.6
Total (*N* = 591)			
Number of items	207	175	416
%	35.0	29.6	70.4

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a non-primary source. *De Standaard* appears to publish more articles with social media as a primary source of information than *De Morgen* ($\chi^2 = 10.582$, $p = 0.005$).

Looking at geographical focus and topics covered in the news articles in which social media are used as a source, our findings are in line with Broersma and Graham's (2013) study on the use of Twitter in British and Dutch newspapers. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are regularly used as sources for international news coverage. Half of the newspaper articles (51 per cent) deal with international news, ranging from (human-interest) stories about celebrities and sports people to hard news coverage on politics and war and conflicts. Table 3 gives an overview of the topics of the articles referencing social media as a news source.

Overall, Table 3 shows that social media is used as a source for both hard and soft news coverage. Hard news stories citing social media typically deal with (national) politics or (international) conflicts. However, the majority (55 percent) of the newspaper stories referring to social media as a source can be labelled as "soft news" as they fit into categories such as "media and show business" (17 per cent), "(popular) culture and arts" (14 per cent), "sports" (12 per cent) and "human interest" (12 per cent). There are slight differences between the two newspapers: while *De Standaard* contains more human-interest

TABLE 2
Number of articles referring to social media as only, primary or non-primary source

	Social media mentioned as only source	Social media mentioned as primary source	Social media mentioned as non-primary source
De Morgen (*N* = 203)			
Number of items	27	77	99
%	13.3	37.9	48.8
De Standaard (N = 213)			
Number of items	29	112	72
%	13.6	52.6	33.8
Total (*N* = 416)			
Number of items	56	189	171
%	13.5	45.4	41.1

TABLE 3
Topics of the articles referencing social media as a news source

	De Morgen (*N* = 203)		*De Standaard* (*N* = 213)		Total (*N* = 416)	
	N	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
Politics	36	17.7	33	15.5	69	16.6
Media/show business	46	22.7	23	10.8	69	16.6
Culture/arts	27	13.3	32	15.0	59	14.2
Sports	27	13.3	23	10.8	50	12.0
Human interest	16	7.9	33	15.5	49	11.8
War and conflicts	16	7.9	19	8.9	35	8.4
Crime/justice	14	6.9	11	5.2	25	6.0
Economy	5	2.5	12	5.6	17	4.1
Technology/science/education	6	3.0	10	4.7	16	3.8
Other	10	4.9	17	8.0	27	6.5

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stories with social media references than *De Morgen*, the latter is more likely to use Facebook, Twitter or YouTube as sources for its media- and show business-related stories.

As said before, social media enable every citizen to participate in the communication process and share ideas and user-generated content publicly. In this sense, they help journalists broaden their spectrum of official sources with unknown and unexpected sources. At the same time, journalists also use social media to follow and "tap into the private sphere" of well-known elite actors such as celebrities, athletes and politicians (Broersma and Graham 2013, 460). Table 4 shows that in 44 per cent of the cases in which social media function as a news source in the content of *De Morgen* and *De Standaard*, they are used to refer to ordinary citizens.

Sometimes individual citizens are directly quoted—for instance, people who have set up a Facebook petition—but mostly social media references to unknown people are made in collective and anonymous terms, as a way to represent the voice of the public. Newspaper journalists tend to refer to ordinary citizens on social media, for example, to give an indication of the popularity or magnitude of a certain person or event on Facebook, Twitter

TABLE 4
Source actors in social media cited in the newspaper articles

	De Morgen (*N* = 203)		*De Standaard* (*N* = 213)		Total (*N* = 416)	
	N	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
Ordinary citizens/the public	90	44.3	91	42.7	181	43.5
Celebrities/artists	49	24.1	55	25.8	104	25.0
Politicians	35	17.2	28	13.1	63	15.1
Athletes	27	13.3	25	11.7	52	12.5
Government or business officials	12	6.0	14	6.6	26	6.3
Experts	9	4.4	12	5.6	21	5.0
Other (including activists and civil society actors)	16	7.9	21	9.8	37	8.9

or YouTube. These ordinary citizens are then paraphrased and addressed as a crowd rather than as individuals.

If quotes are cited in the news stories, they mostly come from well-known sources. Celebrities seem particularly likely to benefit from their social media presence, at least in terms of media attention. Celebrities appear in one-quarter of all newspaper articles referring to social media as a source. Famous sports people (13 per cent) and politicians (15 per cent) also have a greater chance to see their social media activity reflected in newspaper stories. Finally, but to a much lesser extent, social media are used as a source by newspaper journalists to present information, quotes and pictures of government or business officials, experts, political activists and civil society representatives.

Conclusion

This exploratory study provides an initial insight into how social media are used as a news source in Belgian newspaper journalism. First, the data show that in the two Flemish quality newspapers, *De Standaard* and *De Morgen*, references to social media have become commonplace. As such, the findings give support to the claim that for many of today's newspaper journalists monitoring social media platforms has become a part of their daily newsgathering routines. This does not mean, however, that social media dominate the newspaper content as a source of information. On the contrary, the number of articles citing social media as a news source appears to be low. On average, both Flemish quality newspapers publish only five articles per day referring to Facebook, Twitter and/or YouTube, either as (part of) subject or as source, or both. In 7 out of 10 of these articles the social media sites function as a source of information. Facebook and Twitter are more popular as a journalistic source in the newspapers than YouTube.

An important, though tentative, finding is that social media do not seem to be subject to the typical "hierarchy of credibility" in journalistic sourcing. The data presented in Table 4 challenge the assumption, as formulated at the end of the literature review, that in relation to social media journalists would favour official over unofficial sources. The content analysis suggests that social media seem to turn the pyramid upside down: although newspaper journalists use social media to retrieve information from politicians, official institutions and experts, they primarily refer to social media in relation to ordinary citizens, celebrities and sports people. Although it must be stressed that further research is needed to gain a better understanding of how social media can potentially influence the perceived credibility of journalistic sources, this finding of the study is in line with the study by Broersma and Graham (2013), who conclude that even though social media do not seem to diminish the power of elite sources, Twitter has the capacity to increase the diversity of voices in the news by including both unknown and well-known sources that are not available—or at least not easily accessible—other than on social media (see also Hermida, Lewis, and Zamith 2014).

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